

# Yes: San Diegans can play a part in molding the park's future.

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**By Peter K. Ellsworth, Robert A. Kelly and William E. Beamer**  
April 6, 2008

Between now and the fall, every San Diegan has the unique opportunity to personally participate in molding the future of Balboa Park.

They can do so by taking part in the public hearings that are being held by the Balboa Park Committee, which will be analyzing the fact-finding report on the park recently commissioned by our three foundations.

Some will ask why this discussion is going on. The park looks great. Some repairs are now under way. The institutions appear to be thriving. So what is the problem?

The study, "The Soul of San Diego," authored by national experts on parks and infrastructure policy, contains the following analysis: "The park is facing huge challenges, including hundreds of millions of dollars of repairs, unresolved issues about automobiles, large areas of contaminated land, a population of homeless persons, erosion, conflicts between user groups and, worst, an inability to keep up with park and infrastructure maintenance."

Should management of Balboa Park continue to be the responsibility of the city of San Diego? Or is there a better model? Participate in the discussion at the next public hearing at 5:30 p.m., May 1, in the Santa Fe Room at the Balboa Park Club.

Examples of capital and infrastructure needs listed in the report, which are not intended to be a complete list, total a minimum of \$238 million, not counting whatever might be needed to ameliorate parking problems.

"Past funding of the park, the number and cost of approved but unfunded projects, and the current, well-publicized financial difficulties of the city of San Diego strongly suggest that the city is unlikely to be able to appropriately maintain and make necessary future investments in the park as it is presently organized and funded," the report states.

The document, which is available online at all of the foundation Web sites, suggests what proper park governance should look like:

"A successful park governance program must provide an effective and transparent planning and decision making process, clear lines of authority and responsibility, mechanisms for ensuring the availability of adequate funding, and improved processes for procurement, contracting and project management."

It goes on to describe the existing park management as one in which "it is difficult for both the average citizen and even agency staff themselves to understand how decisions are made, and how money is spent."

The report cites research from the Center for Park Excellence in Washington, D.C., that concludes the San Diego Park and Recreation Department “has evolved a particularly opaque budgetary and accounting system when compared to other urban park systems.”

It is obvious that the current situation is the result of many years of neglect, not the fault of current employees. On the contrary, those in charge are doing a superb job keeping the park looking as good as it does with very inadequate resources. The report suggests several possible alternative governance structures and financial options, including joint powers agreements, special districts and public-private partnerships.

These would be major changes. Broad public participation in the process is essential to be sure that public interests are served.

Our foundations commissioned the report to bring these matters to the attention of the public and to urge the city to hold a public process where these matters can be debated and decided. We now have that process in place and we urge you to participate.

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